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A MONOGRAPH

ON

WIRE AND TINSEL INDUSTRY

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IN

BENGAL.

BY

BABU MALLINATH RAY, B.S.C., M.R.A.S.,

Sub-Deputy Collector, 24 Parganas.

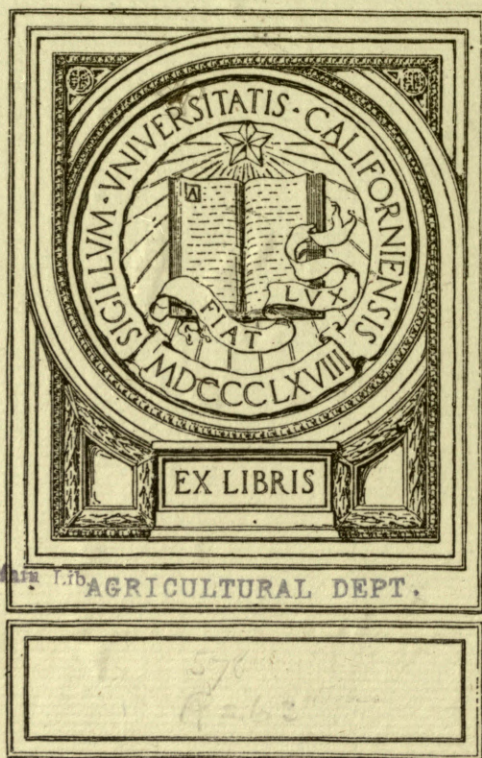


CALCUTTA :

THE BENGAL SECRETARIAT BOOK DEPOT.

1910.

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LIST OF PLATES.

- I.—Drawing of wire.
- II.—Preparing *salma*.
- III.—Preparing *chumki* (spangles).
- IV.—Exhibiting *chumki*, *khankni*, bullion, *salma*.
- V.—Image decorators at work—preparing *anchla* and *mookoot*.
- VI.—Image decorators at work—preparing anklets, armlets, scarf.
- VII.—Exhibiting scarf and crown.
- VIII.—Specimens of *karchal* (embroidery) work.
- IX.—Specimens of *kinkhabs*—brocades and cloth of gold and silver.
- X.—An image with tinsel decorations.

A MONOGRAPH

ON

WIRE AND TINSEL INDUSTRY IN BENGAL.

Antiquity of the Art.—No definite information regarding the early history of the industry is available, but it is certain that this industry has been in existence in India from very ancient times.

There is a legend amongst the Wire and tinsel workers of Patna and Calcutta that Joseph, son of Jacob, was the inventor of this industry. He was, so runs the legend, in the habit of spending his leisure hours in embroidering handkerchiefs with tinsel and wire. To this day the novice offers *niaz* (offerings) to the memory of Joseph when he begins to learn the art and all persons engaged in the industry offer *niaz* to his memory on the last Wednesday of the Muhammadan year.

The antiquity of the industry may be gathered from the old Hindu epic *Ramayana*. Therein we learn that Sita on the occasion of her marriage with Rama was dressed in a rose pink *sari* richly embroidered with gold. There is a record of the industry having been known to the world at the time of the siege of Troy, and there is mention of the Egyptian mummies having been found wrapped in garments wrought with thin strips of gold.

The art in India.—There is no doubt that the Hindu Rajas of the pre-historic period used apparels set with gold, but it is doubtful whether the "tinsel industry" proper was known to them before the Muhammadan period. This much is certain that the industry flourished in towns which were ancient Muhammadan capitals and even now it is generally in the hands of the Muhammadans.

IMPLEMENTS AND WORKING METHODS.

Implements.—A request to a *tarkish* (wire-drawer) to show his tools is generally answered by the production of a small rude table, one or two reels a pair of scissors, a small hammer, a pair of forceps and a few pieces of scrap iron. Technical skill is by no means wanting, and it is often astonishing to see how these men, working with simple and crude tools in little huts, turn out articles of high polish and extreme fineness. Some of the plates give us the idea of those used in Calcutta.

The process of wire-making.—Wires used in this industry are made of silver; the yellow ones are those coated with gold. The yellow of gold is obtained by getting a silver bar coated with a layer of gold in the following manner. 40 to 60 *tolas* of silver (1 *tola*=180 grains) are first melted and moulded into a bar tapering at one end to the shape of a candle. The bar is next wrapped up with very thin gold leaves and tied over firmly with silk threads. Then the bar is gradually heated on the fire till the gold leaves lie firmly on the silver bar. Gold weighing annas 10 to 12 (one *anna*=11·25 grains) is generally used for coating a silver bar weighing 40 to 60 *tolas*. The quantity of gold used varies with the colour and quality of the tinsel ultimately required. If but little gold is put on, the tinsel will be of pale yellowish colour; if a large quantity, it will be of rich gold-red.

The bar thus prepared is technically called *passa* or *kandla* and the class of men who prepared *kandlas* are called *kandla-kash*.

Copper coated with silver is often used and the articles made of it are called *jhuta* or false; whereas those made of silver alone are called *sachha* or pure.

The *passa* or *kandla* is then made over to the wire-drawer known as *tarkash*, who by the aid of a simple apparatus called *ghawa* forces the gold plated bar (*kanāla*) through a series of holes on a stout steel plate, one after the other. Each succeeding hole is narrower and finer than the one before; so that when the *kandla* is passed through the last hole, it is reduced to the

thinness of a wire of a very narrow gauge. The wire thus obtained is coiled round a reel about three inches in diameter shaped like an ordinary reel of thread, technically known as *pairee*, which is fixed at one end of a small table about a foot high by a spike running through the centre (Plate I): at the other end of the table is similarly fixed a larger reel about 6 inches in diameter. This is called *paira*. At the middle of the table is fixed firmly by means of wedges driven into notches in the table a steel plate called *jantar* or *jantri* having graduated holes. One end of the wire coiled on the *pairee* is filed down and laid through a hole in the *jantar* and fastened to a hole on the upper edge of the *paira*. The *paira* is then turned round by an iron rod, and a wire of the desired thinness is coiled on it by being led through a graduated hole. To obtain a still thinner wire, the wire obtained as above is coiled back on the *pairee* and led through a narrower hole in the *jantar*. By repeating the process described above, a wire of any desired thinness is obtained. Wires as fine as hair may be drawn by this process.

Usually a *tola* of a metal is drawn into 600 to 1,200 yards of wire. The gold or silver coating becomes closely fixed by means of this process; and the wire has the appearance of bright gold or silver.

The Jantar.—In Patna the steel plate or *jantar* is now practically ousted from the market by the introduction of European-made gold plated discs about an inch in diameter and of the thickness of a rupee, having a series of holes, each succeeding hole being narrower and finer than the one before. The principle of working is the same; the difference merely being the replacement of a rude but cheap implement by a costly but neat one. The Calcutta people do not use the European *jantar*. They prefer their native tools.

Salma.—*Salmas* are of two varieties:—

- (a) *Kora salma* or coiled round wire.
- (b) *Dobka salma* or coiled flat wire.

Kora salma, is described below. *Dobka salma* will be described later on with *badla* from which it is prepared.

Kora Salma how prepared.—At one end of a small table a wheel is fixed. A few inches away through holes in two pegs an iron rod is fixed horizontally. Another round iron spindle is joined at one end with the rod by a piece of bamboo, the other end being free. At the other end of the table is fixed a reel of gold or silver wire. The wheel is then joined with the iron rod by means of a string. When the wheel is turned, this rod is set on rapid motion. The spindle to which it is joined by an end of the wire from the reel, is also set in motion; and thus the wire is coiled round the spindle, being guided by the fingers of the workman. Thus a *salma* of any length is made. By changing the iron spindle mentioned above *salmas* of different fineness are obtained. Plate No. II is an illustration of this apparatus.

Preparation of Badla or Lametta.—The fine wire described above is flattened in an extremely delicate and skilful manner. The workman, seated before a small and highly polished steel anvil, about 2 inches broad with a steel plate in which there are two or three holes set opposite to him and perpendicular to the anvil, draws through these holes as many wires,—two or three as it may be—by a motion of the index finger and the thumb of his left hand, striking them rapidly but firmly with a steel hammer, the face of which is also polished like that of the anvil. This flattens the wire perfectly; and such is the skill of manipulation, that no portion of the wires escapes the blow of the hammer, the action of drawing the wire, rapid as it is, being adjusted to the length which will be covered by the face of the hammer in its descent. No system of rollers or other machinery could perfectly ensure the same effect, whether of extreme thinness of the flattened wire, or its softness and ductility."

Generally the following kinds of *badla* are used:—

- (a) *Dewali*—Somewhat broad.
- (b) *Kasore*—Thin and light.
- (c) *Kamdani*—For stitching on linen or silk.

From *badla* the following are prepared:—

- (1) *Dobka*—*Salma* or coiled flat wire.
- (2) *Kankni* or pearl wire.
- (3) Bullion.
- (4) *Kailabatoon*.

Preparations of Dobka Salma and Bullion.—*Dobka salma* is prepared in the same way as the *kora salma*; the only difference is that the gold or silver wire is not round but flat. Preparation of *kanki* is similar, but the spindle used for this is not a round one but triangular or rectangular according to choice. *Bullion* is also similarly prepared, but the *badla* used for this is curved and not a flat one. The curvature is obtained by passing the *badla* through the hole in a *jantar* in which a round fine wire is fixed leaving a semi-lunar narrow space. The *badla* thus obtained is wound on its concave side round the spindle.

Preparation of Kallabatoon.—It is prepared by twisting a flattened gold or silver wire round silk thread. The following description by Captain Meadows Taylor of the process by which *kallabatoon*, is manufactured in India will be read with interest:—

“The silk is very slightly twisted, and is rolled upon a winder. The end is then passed over a polished steel hook fixed to a beam in the ceiling of the workshop, and to it is suspended a spindle with a long thin bamboo shank, slightly weighed to keep it steady, which nearly touches the floor. The workman gives the shank of the spindle a sharp turn upon his thigh, which sets it spinning with rapidity. The gold wire, which has been wound on a reel as it passes behind the maker, is there applied to the bottom of the silk thread near the spindle and twists itself upwards, being guided by the workmen as high as he can conveniently reach or nearly his own height, upon the thread: but it is impossible to describe in exact terms the curiously dexterous and rapid process of the manipulation. The spindle is then stopped; the thread now covered with wire is wound upon the spindle and fastened in a notch of the shank when the silk thread is drawn down, and the spindle is again set spinning with the same result as before. Certain lengths of the gold thread ‘*kalla-button*’ are made in skeins, and so sold or used by weavers.”

Preparation of Chumkis or Spangles.—This is very interesting and worthy of notice. A wire is coiled round an iron rod of about $\frac{1}{8}$ to $\frac{1}{16}$ of an inch in diameter. The coil is then taken out and cut into rings with a pair of scissors. Then one by one they are dropped on a highly polished anvil with the aid of forceps and hammered by a polished hammer. With every stroke of the hammer a *chumki* is produced. Plate III illustrates the preparation of *chumkis*.

Utility of the Products.—The articles described above were in great demand in former times. They were chiefly used for the rich who used them for—

- (a) Decorating Hindu idols during the Pujas.
- (b) Decorating garments, caps, turbans, shoes, etc.
- (c) Embroidery and brocades.
- (d) Trappings for horses and elephants.

In Calcutta itself the dresses for dancing girls and itinerant theatrical players are decorated with wire and tinsel articles.

Tinsel for Images.—It is impossible to ascertain from what period the images of gods and goddesses of Hindu worship have been decorated with tinsel ornaments. But there is no doubt that the practice has been in vogue for a very long time; for we find the poet Ram Prosad, who lived about 200 years ago, denouncing the tinsel decorations in the following terms:—“The mother (goddess) who adorns the world with gold and gems—shame to you who want to adorn that mother with wire and tinsel.” Preparation of tinsel ornaments was the hereditary occupation of a sect of the Hindus called *malakars* or the garland and pith (*sola*) decoration-makers. But it has now been taken up by all castes, both men and women.

Kumartali and Machuabazar in Calcutta are the centres of this industry, but there is also a shop at Bhawanipur. At each of those two places there are about 10 shops with 125 workmen, besides 300 women helping them in the industry by doing in-door work. The workers are paid by piece-work; each man earns about 4 to 5 annas a day in the slack season and 10 to 12 annas in the busy season, namely, during the Pujas. Almost all the women doing this work are members of middle class Hindu families who devote their leisure hours to this work. There are also some poor women who depend on it for their livelihood, earning daily from $1\frac{1}{2}$ annas to $2\frac{1}{2}$ annas.

Krishnagar, Sherpur and Dacca are also the chief centres of manufacture of tinsel ornaments.

Work of the decorators are divided as follows:—

- (1) Decoration of the frame in which the image is put.
- (2) Preparation of *mookoot* or tiara or crown.
- (3) „ of *anchla* or scarf.
- (4) „ of necklace, *bajoo* or circular ornament worn on the upper arm, bracelet, anklet, etc.

The images are set up in a frame which is called *marrh*. This *marrh* is covered with thick pieces of tinsels which are highly ornamental, and about a foot or 14 inches in width. Each of these is called a *kalka*.

The pattern of the *kalka* and *anchla* is almost the same. The following are the principal requisites for ornamenting these works:—

- (1) *Kap*—thin slices of *sola* cut out by sharp knife.
- (2) Paste—prepared with wax and *gandha biraj* (scented resin).
- (3) *Angti*—prepared by coiling lametta round an iron wire by means of a *charka*.
- (4) *Jamira*—thin plates coloured red or green and called “ruby” or “emerald” foil.
- (5) Talc.
- (6) *Chumki* or spangles.
- (7) *Bicha chaki*—cup shaped spangles prepared from white or ruby foils.

The *malakars* supply the *kap* to the decorators who, in order to obtain an impression of the design, press it with the foot or elbow on a mould previously made by setting thick cotton thread on a *kap* with the paste.

A mesh work of *angtis* is then laid on the surface of the *kap*, and the impression is thus obtained. The *kap* is then made over to the women workers who cut out some of the interstices by means of *naruns* which are iron rods about 8 inches long with sharp flattened tips. The opening thus made are then closed with pieces of ruby foils from behind. The interspaces are pasted over with *chumkis*, *bicha chaki*, pieces of tale or coloured paper as the case may be. Plates V and VI show the image decorators at work.

For the preparation of the crown (*mookoot*) the following articles are required:—

- (1) An iron wire frame.
- (2) Ruby foil.
- (3) Talc.
- (4) *Kirkira*, an inch of *angti* the two ends of which have been tied together by means of a *resha* or a piece of twisted lametta $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches long.
- (5) *Bakul*—an oval piece of pith enriched with lametta.
- (6) *Chumkis*.
- (7) *Bicha chaki*.

The iron frame is covered with lametta and is set with *bakul*, *kirkir chumki*, etc. Plate V illustrates the preparation of a *mookoot*. The preparation of bracelets, *bajoo* and necklaces is similar. The frame is made of pith on which is spread gum coloured according to design; and on that foils are pasted.

Garment decoration.—*Chumki*, *salma*, *kankri*, *badla* and bullion are used in ornamenting garments, caps, turbans, jackets, shoes, belts, etc. Velvet, silk or linen embroidered with them are called *zardozi* work, and the workers are called *Zardozi*. Both men and women do this work, each earning eight annas to one rupee per day: Plates VII and IX are illustrations of such work.

Embroidery.—In Murshidabad and Patna gold and silver embroidery or *karchab* work is done with *kallabatoon* thread. Elephant jheel, horse trappings, canopies with fringes, palanquin covers, gowns, jackets, dresses, bodices, prayer carpets, caps, slippers, money-bags, belts, etc., are embroidered with *karchab* or *karchikan* work. Embroidery is either worked in the loom or wrought with the needle. Some of the best embroidery is wrought on a velvet ground or on English broadcloth. The heaviest kind of gold embroidery is called *kinkhab*. It is done by fixing the fabric to be embroidered on a frame work. The patterns are lightly painted or printed on the fabric with some kind of coloured material; and these patterns the embroiderer follows in laying the *kallabatoon* thread. Gold and silver embroidery on cotton is called *kamdani*.

Brocades and cloth of gold and silver.—Silk fabrics with raised patterns are called brocades. Gold or silver cloth, *i.e.*, silk woven with gold or silver thread are known in India by the name of *kinkhabs* (kincob). Silk brocades are made wherever silken stuffs are manufactured on an extensive scale. Murshidabad, Benares, Ahmedabad, Surat, Multan, Poona and Aurangabad are the places most noted for silk brocades. Benares *saris* still maintain their old reputation; but it is the fabric with gold and silver flowers that is mostly sought after. The Bengali ladies are very fond of those *saris* and there is a considerable demand for them throughout this province.

In 1890 the Hon'ble Mr. E. W. Collin, I.C.S., made the following remarks regarding gold and silver embroidery in his report on Arts and Industry in Bengal:—

Gold and silver embroidery is chiefly applied to caps and to the trappings of horses and elephants. Murshidabad and Patna have several skilled embroiderers, and there are altogether about 1,000 men engaged in this work in the latter town. Gold and silver wire (*Kallabatoon*) is made in Patna and Murshidabad in small quantities, but most of the gold thread comes from Benares and the North-Western Provinces.

Lace.—Gold and silver wires are used in lacemaking, lace ribbons, borders and edgings for Indian use and are known as *Gota*, *Kinara* and *Anchal* respectively. They are of various breadth and patterns and are woven in a tiny loom with silk thread for the warp and gold and silver for the woof, or *vice versa*. Dacca, Murshidabad, Patna, Benares are the principal centres of the Indian lace manufactures. *Gota* and *Kinara* are chiefly used as borders for female garments.

Head-dresses.—Amongst the rich gold woven ribbons called *seerpech* are worn on the head by bridegrooms, as also plumes made of finely cut silver leaf. The distinction of wearing *seerpech* belongs by right to the king, but as in the East the bridegroom is considered the king of that day, he is allowed to bedeck himself with royal robes.

The *topore* or cone-shaped pith hat decorated with tinsel is, however, invariably used on marriage occasions. The preparation of the *topore* is a monopoly of the *malakars*.

The Rev. Lal Behary Day made the following remarks in his popular work, *Bengal Peasant Life*:—

A costly dress for the bridegroom had been purchased; the village *malakar* was ordered to prepare as gaudy a crown as he could make, for all Bengali bridegrooms, however poor, put on tinsel crowns at the wedding; equally gaudy shoes, embroidered with silver, had been brought up from Calcutta."

Shutka or Hookka-snake.—The *hooka*-pipes called *shutka* are invariably adorned with gold and silver wires. *Kallabatoon* and laces are used for the costly pipes and false (*jhuta*) lace is used for the common ones. The pipes called "snakes" by the old Anglo-Indians are manufactured in all the large towns in Upper India.

Tinsel printing.—Silver and gold tinsel prints on coloured cloth (*saries*) are made in some places. These gay clothes are worn specially by women of the poorer class on festive days, *e.g.*, at weddings and *tamashas*.

Gold and silver leaves.—Imitation gold and silver leaves are at present not prepared in Calcutta. It is said that there was a factory at Maniktala, which went into liquidation and was purchased by the *shajwallahs* (image-decorators) of Kumartuli. They could not work it satisfactorily, as they could not compete with the machine-made foreign goods which were far cheaper; and hence it failed.

Pure gold and silver leaves are, however, prepared at Chitpore. There are four shops. Nazir Hossain, of Patna, who holds a shop at 88, Lower Chitpur Road, is an expert. He has a workman named Mahamed Taki who is a good worker. He earns Rs. 20 a month.

The preparation of these leaves is interesting. Sheets of gold or silver are first prepared. One *tola* of gold sheet is then cut into 160 pieces and silver sheet into 140 pieces. There are leather cases (6" × 4") containing 140 or 160 as the case may be, made of dried *ghilli* or membrane of deer. Pieces of gold or silver are thus placed between two dried membranes, and the cases thus filled up are treated in the following way instead of putting them under a hot press.

The leather cases are hammered for a long time on a slab of stone till the foils measure 4" × 5". There is no chance of any injury while they remain packed between the two layers of deer membrane. One hundred and sixty leaves of gold, weighing one tola, are sold at Rs. 28 and 140 silver leaves of the same weight at Re. 1-8.

Present condition of the industry in Patna.—Like many indigenous industries the "wire and tinsel" industry has now deteriorated. The compiler of the Patna District Gazetteer remarks: "Nowhere is the decline of Patna as a manufactory centre more noticeable than in the matter of hand industries. Practically every kind of industry is carried on; but none of them are of special importance or extent, and few of the products are exported." Some families made this industry a hereditary occupation, but their number is gradually decreasing.

The undermentioned are the more noted wire and tinsel factory owners and their addresses:—

Fajju Mian	} Fasahat Ka Maidan.
Ali Ahmad	...	...	...
Hazi Akbar	...	...	...
Haji Mohamed Ismail	...	...	...
Abdul Rahaman, son of Haji Tagiram	} Mughalpura.
Doulat Mian	...	...	...
Soopan Mian	...	...	...
Abdulla	...	...	...
				Kalu Khan Ka Bagh.
				Sadargali.

The people themselves ascribe their fall from their former state to want of encouragement, their idea of encouragement being that intending purchasers should place orders and make them advances on account before they take the work in hand. Whether this idea is due to poverty or to want of enterprise, it is difficult to say with certainty; probably it is due to both. Certain it is, that there is no likelihood of the local industry regaining its lost position; for intending buyers can obtain their requirements from Benares where ready made articles are stocked, and the finish of the work is much superior. The outturn of the Patna district is small and export is confined to Bihar.

Condition of the industry in Calcutta.—About 33 years ago this industry was in a very flourishing condition in Calcutta. There were about 9 big shops at Machuabazar, each shop having 20 to 25 expert workmen, and each of those workmen used to earn Rs. 2 to Rs. 5 a day.

In or about the year 1877, a German manufacturer came to Calcutta and took away samples of each of these products. The next year after that machine-made articles were imported from Germany. Though the price of the German produce was much less than that of the Calcutta produce, still the industry in Calcutta thrived till 1897 because the finish of the German articles was not so good as that of home-made ones. In 1897 very fine and well-finished machine-made articles were imported from Germany; the skilled hand labour of the native workmen could not cope with the machine-made articles; and hence within a very short time the whole native industry has almost ceased to exist.

There are at present only three shops at Machuabazar. Sheik Kalu has a shop at 133, Machuabazar Street, and he is an old expert in the art. He has only one expert workman, named Moshahab Ali. These workmen, however, find very little work for them. There is no longer that demand for fine country-made wires, but as the imitation silver spangles of Germany are not highly polished nor of good finish, there is still some demand for *chumki* (spangles), and hence these three shops eke out a miserable existence.

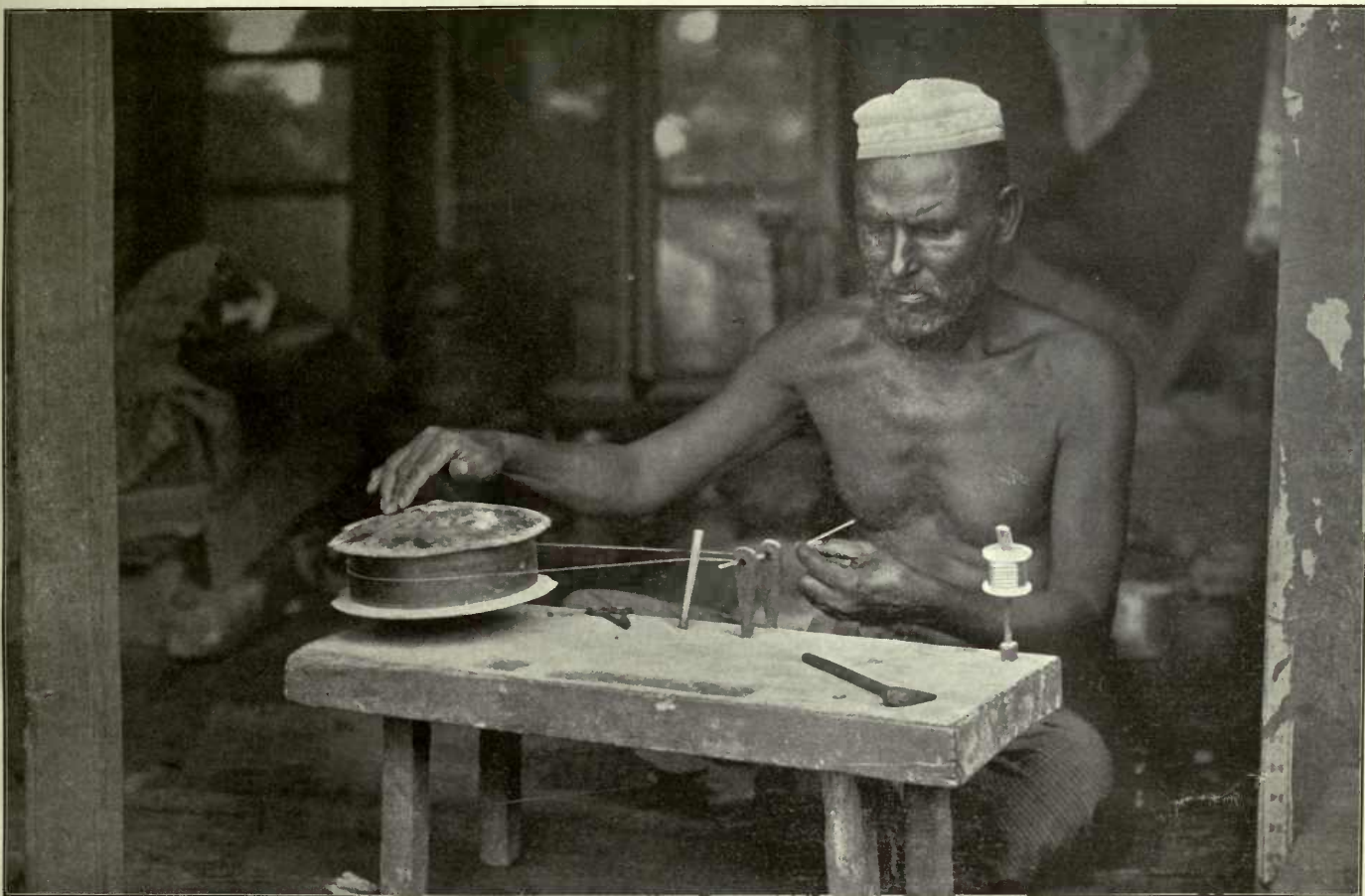
The German goods have thus displaced to a great extent the country produce. "A proof of the superiority of the Indian over the European gold and silver wire as usually manufactured, was afforded at the Dublin Exhibition a few years ago (prior to 1887), during the progress of which the chief exhibitors of the Irish poplins in which gold and silver thread was used, had to change their specimens on account of becoming tarnished; whereas the metal embroidered fabrics of India, shown on the same occasion, retained their colour and lustre throughout." *Indian Art Journal*.



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PLATE I.



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PLATE II.



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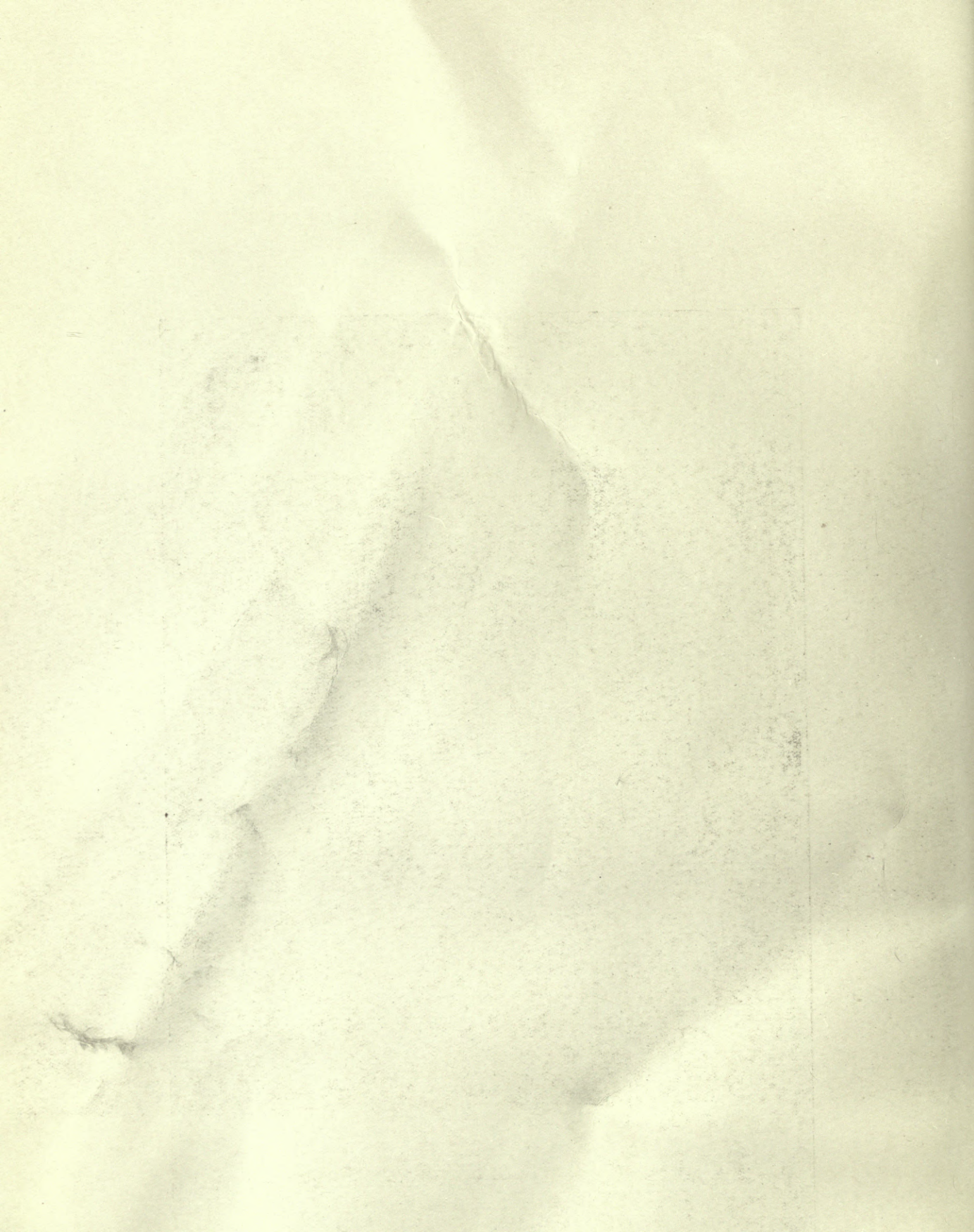
PLATE III.



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PLATE IV.

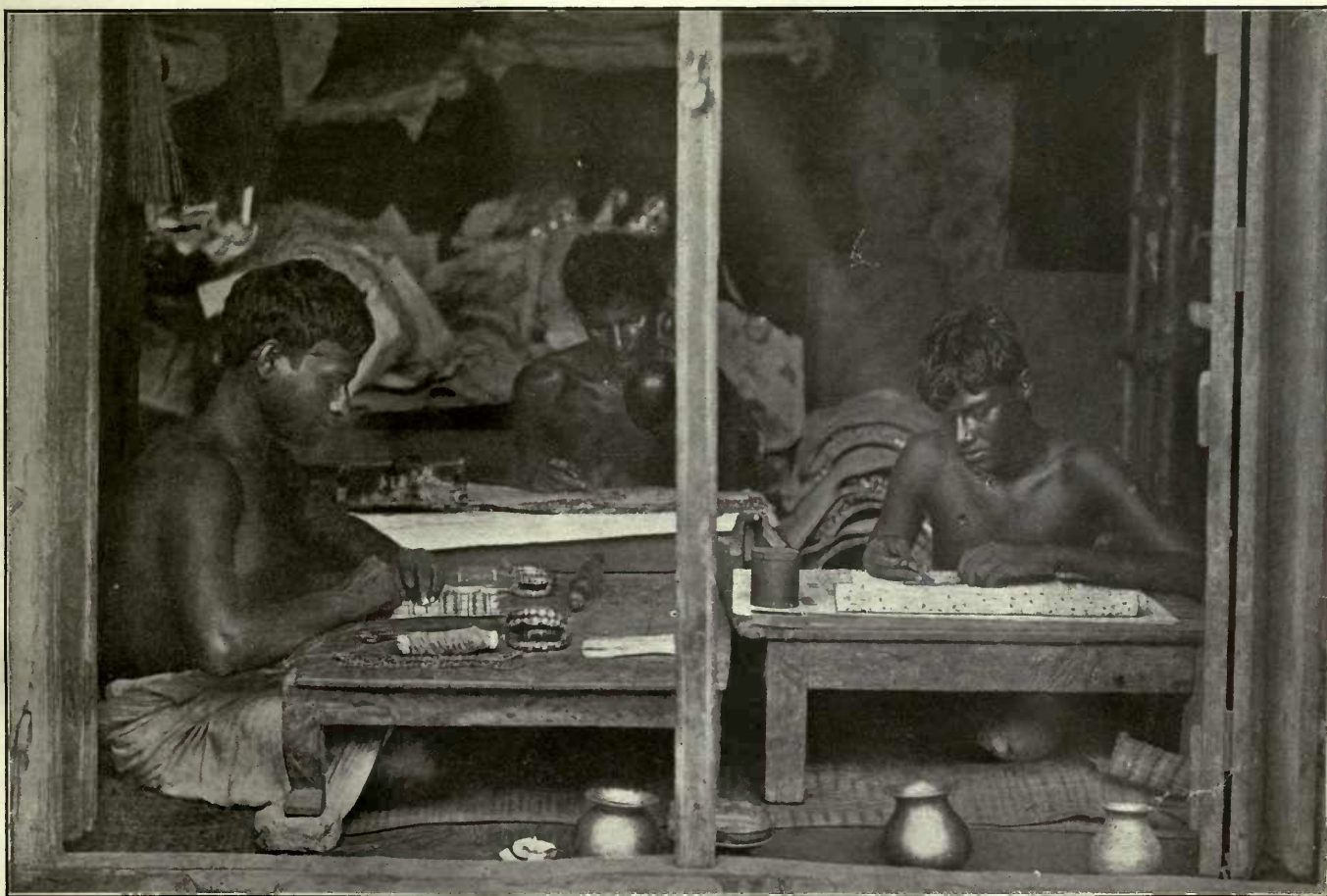




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PLATE V.



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PLATE VI.



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PLATE VII.



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PLATE VIII.



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PLATE IX.



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PLATE X.

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